

**THE SPY
ACROSS
THE WATER**

ALSO BY JAMES NAUGHTIE

The Madness of July
Paris Spring

NON-FICTION

The Rivals
The Accidental American
The Making of Music
The New Elizabethans
On the Road: American Adventures from
Nixon to Trump

THE SPY ACROSS THE WATER

JAMES NAUGHTIE



An Aries Book

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For Vidhi. Welcome to the world.

April 1985

THIS IS FICTION, BUT THE BACKGROUND TO THE STORY IS real. In early 1985, the British and Irish governments were negotiating their first constitutional compromise on Northern Ireland, where thousands of British troops had been deployed for many years against the armed campaign of the Provisional IRA. The private discussions were sensitive, largely secret and often fraught. Only six months earlier, the IRA had tried to kill the prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, and her cabinet by bombing the Grand Hotel in Brighton during the Conservative Party conference. During that same spring, London was reaping new benefits from its most successful long-term intelligence coup against the Soviet Union, from an agent with a vantage point at the heart of the incoming regime of Mikhail Gorbachev in Moscow. Away from the public eye, these secrets collided in the British Embassy in Washington. This is the story of what *might* have happened when they did.

One

WILL FLEMYNG THOUGHT NOTHING COULD DISTRACT him from the open grave. He was wrong.

His eye picked up a figure on the edge of the crowd, and the shock pulled his gaze away. Around him, the rain that had arrived before dawn had drenched the grassy slope where Hannah and the children were huddled in grey and black, and he was consumed by memories of the kid brother waiting to be lowered into the ground, about whom he was reminded how much he didn't know. But his attention shifted in an instant. Although Flemyng gave no sign of alarm, excitement crept across his skin like fear.

He looked towards an old man, standing alone, who had an awkward, twisted frame. If he had once been tall, now he had folded inwards. His oversized glasses were shining in the wet, and an antique black homburg made him look to Flemyng like some funereal accompaniment, a mummer among the mourners who might have been hired to stand in a tableau of grief when the priest had finished, and Abel was gone. His hands were deep in the pockets of his dark coat. He

was motionless, unflinching in the gusty drizzle, and Flemyng thought at that moment that his stillness was as threatening as any weapon.

Why was he there?

Flemyng knew immediately who he was, although they had never met. The face of a legend had materialised at the graveside and with a hint of magic, too, because Flemyng hadn't seen him arrive, although he'd scanned the crowd for friends and was alert to any sign of recognition from someone standing near Hannah who might want a hand or need a word of consolation afterwards. No. He hadn't been there, and then he was.

Flemyng thought of the scene in church an hour earlier. He had been in the front row beside Hannah and so engaged with the melancholy choreography that he had taken too little trouble to identify everyone there. Now he regretted it. Had the old man been there, perhaps concealed by a pillar? Maybe he'd wanted to hide, which is how he'd spent much of his life.

In the cemetery it was difficult to hear the priest. The Brooklyn traffic was close by, and the air was so heavy with damp that nothing was clear nor sharp. Manhattan was a cloudy blur. Flemyng was accustomed to putting on a public face and he could deal calmly with enquiring looks, the small gestures of recognition made from respect that demanded a response. But he was confused, and disturbed by the fact – indisputable, overwhelming – that the unexpected visitor had swept from his mind the picture of his brother that he carried to the graveside.

Though not, certainly, from the question that had tormented him for more than a week. How exactly did Abel die – what had his last hour been like? And why?

Flemyng knew none of the pallbearers who lowered the coffin, letting the cords fall into the grave with a rattle on the wood as they stood back. The priest was finishing. 'Lift us from the darkness of this grief...'

Heads were bowed. He had not known that Abel would choose to be buried in the old way, and was pleased by how much it consoled him. After the prayer, he approached the priest, who put out both hands. 'Ambassador...'

Flemyng hugged Hannah and the children again. He would go home with them, to a house with no husband or father, but first he had to dispense comfort at the graveside. When he stepped back to let others approach as if he was in a receiving line, he turned naturally, without displaying anxiety, to look for the old man.

He had gone.

Puzzled, Flemyng got into a car with Hannah and the children and it took them slowly towards the gates. A few cars followed them, in a small procession that would make its way across the river to Abel's house on 20th. The driver pulled up at a stop light just outside the cemetery. As he did so, a black town car pulled out from the line behind them, the driver choosing just the right moment, and slowed down alongside in the next lane. Flemyng saw the rear window slide down, and a face turn deliberately towards him. He had his second shock of the day, this time in slow motion.

Red-haired and lightly bearded, with features thinner and stretched by the years, his face was as familiar as a family photograph. Their eyes met, then the window went up again. That was all. The rain on the glass let nothing stay in focus. The traffic light changed and the car was away.

For two hours, Flemyng offered comfort to the family, spoke about his brother to neighbours and friends, saw a few

of his own. He had a few minutes on the phone to Francesca, in London with their two young sons who were changing schools, and she consoled him. He wondered about Maria, Abel's workmate and his own confidante, marooned in Poland or Czecho under the pretence of a journalistic life, but on the prowl. A new story was starting for him, he was sure, but his alarm didn't show to anyone who was there.

Concealment was his nature.

A couple of hours passed smoothly, helped along on the tide of sadness, then lifted at moments when the necessary release of tension allowed them to laugh. He had left his driver in town and made his own way to the cemetery with the family, leaving the instruction that he would see it through without an official presence at his side. 'No rigmarole, today of all days. Please.'

He had also made an unusual arrangement for his return to Washington. They would drive all the way. The day was always destined to be difficult, and he preferred the privacy of the car to anything else. Now, dipping into the Lincoln Tunnel, he thought of the decision as providential. A few hours of undisturbed thought, and solitude.

Before they settled into silence and the slimy Jersey moonscape, his driver repeated the sympathies he'd offered that morning. He asked how the funeral had passed off.

'As well as it could have, Gus, thank you,' Flemyng said. 'But a strange day indeed.'

The driver said he understood. 'A sad one.'

'No, not just the sadness,' Flemyng said, with the sharpness his colleagues knew well. 'You see, I've encountered a ghost. And not just one, but two.'